DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 226 702 IR 010 579

AUTHOR Solomon, Henry; And Others
TITLE Content and Effect of Children's Commercials.
PUB DATE Apr 82
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association (Baltimore, MD, April 1982).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Rating Scales; *Childrens Television; Content Analysis; Identification (Psychology); Mass Media Effects; *Role Models; *Television Commercials; Television Research; *Television Viewing
IDENTIFIERS *Consumers

ABSTRACT

The 3 studies described in this paper focused on the image of the child in television advertising directed toward children between the ages of 2 and 11. Using an analysis code containing 16 operationally-defined categories, the first study analyzed the behaviors of children depicted in 37 commercials for toys, food, and clothing from Saturday morning children's programming. Results showed a predominance of white male characters and toy advertisements, and consumer behavior depicted as happy, extroverted, and primarily pro-social, but not assertive or creative. Study 2 analyzed 135 commercials from weekday afternoon children's programming from 1979 and 1980. The predominance of toy commercials and of white males (except for 1980) reflected both earlier studies and the first study. In the third study, 75 children from two New York schools in grades 1 through 3 were individually interviewed concerning their perceptions of the children portrayed in television commercials. Overall, these studies indicate that the child actors in commercials are presented as happy, and that even first grade subjects recognize this happiness. From grades 1 through 3, subjects showed increasing sophistication in understanding some aspects of the reality of commercials, but this sophistication was related only weakly to their desire for specific products and not related at all to their feelings that toys and clothes bring happiness. Ten references are included. (LMM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED226702

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

CONTENT AND EFFECT OF CHILDREN'S COMMERCIALS[1]

Henry Solomon
Manhattanville College

Judith Minton and Linda Zener Solomon
Marymount Manhattan College

Judy Durning
Manhattanville College

Joan Zoldessy
Hunter College
School of Social Work

Barbara Rappaport-Taylor
New York City Board of Education

Abstract

Two content analyses of children's TV commercials showed that child actors are portrayed as possessing products and being happy with them. An interview study of children in grades 1 through 3 found an age-related awareness that the actors, though happy, do not own the advertised products. This awareness however, provided only a weak defense against the desire for advertised products.

1. Presented at the annual meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, Baltimore Maryland, April, 1982. The authors would like to thank Joan Dodge, LeaAnn Durcan, Gina Roberts and Martha Torres for their help with study 3.

IR010579

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Henry Solomon
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

By the time the average child graduates from high school today, he or she has spent more hours in front of the television set, 17,000 hours, than in the classroom, 11,000 hours (Rubinstein, 1978). On the average, children between 2 and 11 years watch about 25 hours of television per week through the year (Nielson, 1975). Furthermore, children in this age group in the United States are annually exposed to more than 20,000 television commercial messages (Adler,1978).

Accordingly, it seems important to analyse the content of television programs and how children interpret that content. The present series of three studies focussed on advertising directed toward children (approximately 2 to 11) watching commercial channels. The first two studies constituted content analyses of commercials, and the third was a survey of 6 - 10 year old subjects, assessing their reactions to and interpretations of commercial content.

Previous research on commercials has provided some information in these areas. There is evidence that viewing commercials increases a child's desire for specific products presented. Goldberg and Gorn (1978), using preschool children, have shown that viewing a commercial increases a child's desire to play with the advertised toy, rather than with a friend who does not have the toy. Skeikh and Moleski (1977), using fifth grade children, have shown that viewing a commercial increases the child's estimate of the monetary worth of the toy. As far as content is concerned, studies of Saturday morning programming throughout the 1970's have indicated that commercials are typically 30 seconds in length with an average of 17% of programming time devoted to commercials (e.g., Barcus, 1978). The percentage of toy advertising vs. food and other advertising varies from 18% to 59% from study to study depending on such factors as proximity

to Christmas (e.g., Barcus, 1978). Close to 2/3 of the characters in the commercials are children; and white males predominate. Little information about 'hard' qualities of products (e.g., price, size, durability) is given, rather claims of a products' potential for fun and power or good taste and nutrition are common (Atkin and Heald, 1977).

Studies 1 and 2 reported here were an attempt to fill what was seen as a gap in this literature, namely the analysis of the behavior of the children in the commercials. The intended consequence of a commercial is product appeal. However, the child's hours spent in front of the television set may also allow commercials to present subtle and unintended messages about social behavior. The children in commercials may serve as role models for the child-viewer, demonstrating attitudes and behaviors that presumably bring approval or self-satisfaction. Thus, an empirical account of these potentially modelled behaviors was thought to be of interest.

Studies 1 and 2 examined the image of the child in commercials intended for the 2-11 years age group. The first study constituted an analysis of behaviors of children depicted in a sample of commercials shown during Saturday morning children's programming. The second study analysed the behaviors of children in commercials shown during the week. Only commercials with 'real life', rather than cartoon characters, were studied because of the potential effectiveness of these TV peers as models. This choice followed upon the research indicating that preschool children are most likely to imitate aggressive behavior when it is presented by real life or filmed human models (Bandura, Ross, and Ross, 1963), and the research indicating that perceived similarity to model encourages modeling behavior (Rosenkrans, 1967).

Study 1

Method

A code for content analysis was developed specifically for this study. The code contained 16 operationally defined categories, some with sub-categories. The list was as follows: 1. sex of child actor; 2. race of child actor; 3. affect: happy, sad, neutral, affect-change; 4. product relationship: possession, acquisition; 5. interaction while playing: alone, with others, parallel play; 6. verbal behavior toward object, toward human; 7. aggressive behavior: fantasy, real life; 8. nurturant behavior: toward object, toward human; 9. altruistic behavior: toward object, toward human; 10. competition; 11. attention-seeking; 12. creative play; 13. curiosity; 14. oral-receptive behavior: eating, drinking; 15. fantasy transformation; 16. help-seeking.

Three one hour segments of children's television were videotaped on three consecutive Saturday mornings (Nov. 11,18,25, 1978). The three major New York area networks were used, CBS on the first Saturday, NBC on the second, and ABC on the last. All commercials aired during this time presenting filmed live children were used for the content analysis.

The resulting video tape contained 37 commercials for toys, food, and clothing products, and was approximately 18½ minutes in length.

One experimenter categorized the behaviors of the 53 children in the commercials, stopping the tape at 10 second intervals for analsis. In commercials containing a group with more than two children, the behaviors of the 'main character' (i.e., the child who was seen the most or who spoke the most) were used. If a commercial appeared more than once, then the total number of behaviors recorded was multiplied by the number of presentations. Behaviors were not

mutually exclusive, and more than one behavior could be recorded in any 10-second interval. Prior to carrying out this content analysis, two observers (including the one who did the final content analysis) tested the reliability of the coding. Reliability was measured by the total number of agreements divided by the total number of agreements plus disagreements. The resulting inter-observer agreement was .87.

Results - Study 1

Of the 37 observed commercials, 62% were advertisements for toys, 35% for food, and 3% for clothes. Fifty-three characters had major roles. Most of the characters were male (60%). All of the major characters were white. As far as affect is concerned, the children were seen as happy/(Kids with underoos were so happy that they danced) for the bulk of the time periods (73%). When not specifically happy (smiling, laughing), the children were categorized as neutral (27%). There were no instances of children portraying sadness or change in affect from sad to happy or vice versa. Almost all of the children (94%) were presented as being in possession of the product from the beginning of the commercial. They were never seen buying the product, receiving it as a gift, or putting it together. In terms of interaction while playing, the predominant pattern was playing with other children (50%); playing alone was less common (30%), and parallel play least frequent (20%). Verbal behavior toward humans was somewhat more common than verbal behavior directed at objects (57% vs 43%). In terms of types of play behaviors, competition, altruism and nurturance were most frequent (93 % of behaviors fit into the play category); attention-seeking, creative play and curiosity were each coded in only one 10-second instance, and real-life aggression, fantasy transformation, and help-seeking did not occur at all.

Discussion - Study 1

Comparing the results of this study to earlier ones, one can see the continuing trend of predominance of white male characters and of toy advertisements in this pre-Christmas time period. As far as bahavior is concerned, the picture of the consumer that emerged here was one who is happy, extraverted, and primarily pro-social, but not assertive or creative in behavior.

Method - Study 2

The code for analysis contained similiar categories to those in Study 1. Six one-hour segments of weekday afternoon (after 3 p.m.) children's programming were videotaped. Four of these hours were taped in 1979 (3 on Nov. 13 and one on Nov. 15). Two of these hours were taped in 1980 (one each on Sept. 18 and Sept. 25). The first 5 hours of taping used one local N.Y. station (Ch. 11), the sixth, a different local channel (Ch. 5). All commercials aired during this time were included in the content analysis.

The tape that resulted contained 130 commercials, and was approximately 65 minutes in length.

One experimenter categorized the overall content of the commercials, as well as the behavior of the live child actors, stopping the tape at 10-second intervals for analysis. As in Study 1, commercials appearing more than once were counted as seperate units, and more than one category could be recorded in any one 10-second interval.

Results - Study 2

In the interest of brevity, 1979 and 1980 have been combined when yielding similiar results. Looking first at type of commercial, in 1979, toys, food, and public service categories constituted 86% vs. 6% vs. 4% respectively, whereas in 1980, the same categories

were 71% vs 21% vs 8%. Male characters were somewhat overrepresented (59%) in 1979, but not in 1980 (48%).

Looking at affect and behaviors of the children, satisfaction with the toy or food was rated by the coder as medium or high (67% and 33%) in all commercials; 50% of the combined toy and food commercials showed children interacting with other children; aggressive behavior toward objects was seen in 8% of the commercials, and nurturance, also toward objects, in 19%. Competitive behavior (9%) was seen only in game situations. Altruism, curiosity and creative play were never observed.

Discussion - Study 2

The predominance of toy commercials, and of white males (except for 1980) replicated both earlier studies and study 1 here despite the fact that the present study involved more recent and weekday, rather than weekend, programming. Finally, as a general picture, the behavioral pattern of the happy and sociable consumer appeared again, as it did in Study 1.

Study 3

Previous studies have shown that young children (particularly those under 8) do not have the cognitive sophistication to understand the true nature of commercials. Ward and his colleagues (1977) have shown that children ages 5 to 8 either fail to distinguish programs from commercials or differentiate the two based on such superficial characteristics as the fact that commercials are shorter. The older children, on the other hand, are more likely to give a functional basis for differentiation, noting that commercials try to sell the products. Similarly, Robertson and Rossiter (1974) found that only about ½ of first graders understood the selling intent of commercials while

virtually all fifth graders showed this understanding. Younger children tended to attribute an 'assistive' intent (shows us what we can buy) purpose to commercials, and were also more likely to 'trust' commercials, and to say that they want every toy or game that they see advertised.

Finally, Faber, Perloff and Hawkins (1978) showed that the inability of younger subjects to attribute persuasive intent to commercials is related to their difficulty in 'taking the role of the other' and in understanding that another person can have a different goal than oneself.

The rationale behind the third study reported here stemmed from this previous literature and from the content analyses of Study 1 and Study 2. It was shown in Studies 1 and 2 that the children in the commercials virtually always possess a product and are happy with it. They show positive behaviors and seem pleased with themselves and each other. Since the younger child viewer trusts the commercials, and sees them in an egocentric way, the present authors postulated that the child viewer might see the actors as being happy because of owning the product. Thus these child viewers might desire the advertised products and expect them to bring happiness.

Method - Study 3

The subjects in the study were 75 children in grades 1,2, and 3 (N = 34,20, and 21 respectively), in 2 different schools in the New York area. The children were individually interviewed by trained female interviewers. The interview schedule contained 23 questions beginning with demographic information, and then proceeding to the child's reactions to commercials, and realization that the kids in

commercials are actors on a job. All questions allowed for fixed alternative responses. At the conclusion of the interview, children were thanked and told that they had been very helpful.

Results - Study 3

Overall, the participants (96%) believed that the 'kids' shown in commercials were happy. There was an age related progression in children's awareness that the toys shown on TV were not purchased by the actors or their families, but by the 'TV people'. Eighteen % of the grade 1 subjects gave the response 'TV people'; 40% of the grade 2 subjects, and 52% of the grade 3, $X^2(2) = 7.59$, $p<.05$. There was also an age related progression in children's awareness that the toys on TV did not belong to the actors. Sixty-seven % of the children in grade 3 believed that the toys were given back, as opposed to 25% of grade 2 and 32% of grade 1, $X^2(2) = 8.93$ $p < .05$.

Furthermore, as shown by point biserial correlations, increased understanding that the toys were not kept by the actors tended to be related to a decreased desire for advertised products ($r= .22$, $p < .10$), but not related to the feeling that people would be happier if they had more toys and clothes ($r = .12$. n. s.).

The subjects' desire for consumer products was not significantly different from grade to grade. 96% of the children said that they wanted either 'some" or "a lot" of things that are shown on television commercials. Forty-four percent of grade 1 subjects said that people would be 'lots' happier if they had more toys and clothes; 40% of grade 2 subjects gave this response, and 62% of grade 3 subjects.

Discussion - Studies 1, 2, 3

Overall, these studies indicate that the child actors in TV

commercials are presented as happy, and that even grade 1 subjects recognize this happiness. From grades 1 through 3, subjects did show increasing sophistication in understanding some aspects of the reality of commercials; however, this sophistication was related only weakly to their desire for specific products, and not related at all to their feeling that toys and clothes bring happiness. One might argue that the happiness of the actors is one of many factors in our society that promotes such a consumer mentality.

References

Adler, R.P., Lesser, G.S., Meringoff, L.K., Roberts, T.S. Rossiter, J., and Ward, S. The effects of television advertising on children. Lexington, Mass: Lexington Books, 1980.

Atkin, C., & Heald, G. The content of children's toys and food commercials. Journal of Consumer Research, 1977, 27, 107-14

Barcus, F.E. Commercial children's television: a content analysis of children's programming and advertising broadcast in October, 1977. Newton, Mass: Action for Children's Television, 1978.

Faber, R.J., Perloff, R.M. & Hawkins, R.P. The abuses of television for children: some survey data and extrapolations. Paper presented at the American Psych. Assoc. meeting, Toronto, 1978.

Goldberg, M., and Gorn, G. Some unintended consequences of TV advertising to children. Journal of Consumer Research, 1978, 5, 22-29.

Nielson, A.C.Co. The television audience. Chicago: A.C. Nielson Co., 1979.

Robertson, T., & Rossiter, J. Children and commercial persuasion: an attributive theory analysis. Journal of Consumer Research, 1974, 1, 13-20.

Robertstein, E.A. Television and the young viewer, American Scientist, 1978, 66(6), 685-93

Sheikh, A.A., & Moleski, M.M. Children's percention of the value of an advertised product. JOB, 1077, 21 (3), 347-354.

Ward, S., Wackman, D.B., & Wartella, E. How children learn to buy. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1977.